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ABSTRACT

What and how do students learn from motion pictures, and how does this knowledge interact with the history they learn in school? This is a complex problem-space and one that has seen little empirical research. To lay the groundwork for exploring these questions, a pilot study utilized a qualitative methodology in which high school students viewed excerpts from two Hollywood/commercial movies portraying an historical event from differing perspectives. The historical event was westward expansion in 19th century United States. The films selected were "Dances with Wolves" and "Far and Away." Students thought-aloud while reading a textbook excerpt and answered an historical problem-solving question. Semi-structured interviews conducted with six Wisconsin high school students sought to probe participants' approaches to answering the question, their attitude toward historical films, and how the history they learn from movies interacts with what they learn in school. Includes six figures. Historical information is appended. (Contains 13 references.) (BT)

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RUNNING HEAD: Movie Influence

ED 465 690

From "Birth of a Nation" to "Pearl Harbor": The Influence of a Movie's Perspective on Students' Historical Understandings.

by

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R. J. Paxton

ABSTRACT

What and how do students learn from motion pictures, and how does this knowledge interact with the history they learn in school? This is a complex problem space and one that has seen little empirical research. To lay the groundwork for exploring these questions, this pilot study utilizes a qualitative methodology in which students view excerpts from two "Hollywood" movies portraying a historical event from differing perspectives. The event is Westward Expansion in 19th Century America. Students then think-aloud while reading a textbook excerpt and answer a historical problem-solving question. Semi-structured interviews seek to probe participants' approaches to answering the question, their attitudes toward historical films, and how the history they learn from movies interacts with what they learn in school.

Introduction

Extraordinary claims have been made about the power of motion pictures to teach history. Various authors maintain that "Hollywood" movies have the capacity to lift students to "a higher level of inquiry" (Sabato, 1982), to "preserve details of life that may not be communicated or appreciated in writing" (Johnson and Vargas, 1994), and to help history "come alive to students" (Dobbs, 1987).

While we do not doubt that movies are one of the most powerful art forms of the 20th Century--with substantial influence over many forms of thought, including historical—we wonder precisely what impact they have on K-12 students' understanding of history. Few controlled studies have sought to find out. A wide variety of research has targeted the ways that students make sense of various forms of textual materials (cf. Wineburg, 1991, 1998; Young & Leinhardt, 1998; Paxton, 1997, in-press; Rouet, Britt, Mason & Perfetti), however with a few notable exceptions (cf. Seixas, 1993; Wade, Thompson & Watkins, 1994), little empirical research has examined what and how young students learn from film, and how this knowledge interacts with the history they learn in school. This pilot study aims to take a modest step toward filling this research void.

There are, of course, good reasons that researchers tend to focus primarily on text. The link between historians and the written word is strong indeed. While there are other ways of learning about the past (archeological, architectural, pictographic, and oral, for example), the centrality of written documents, whether primary or secondary, is a fact of life for most historians (Barzun, 1974; Novik, 1988). This being the case, most research into how students learn history—and how it should be taught--has targeted learning from texts.

However, while the written word predominates in how adult historians think about the past, the same may not be the case for K-12 students in the United States. These students spend much of their time sitting in front of television or movie screens. Recent research suggests that a television is switched on for an average of more than seven hours a day in the typical American home (Berk, 1999). In short, a great deal of what these students know about the past may not be learned by reading works of history, or even in history classrooms. Rather, much of their historical knowledge may come from movies and/or television shows. Furthermore, numerous books and articles advocate the use of commercial motion pictures in the history classroom (cf. Maynard, 1971; Kraig, 1983; Johnson & Vargas, 1994). However, the extent to which students form their understandings of the past from historical movies is far from clear.

One way to think about students' mental representations of the past is as a "situation model" (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Kintsch, 1998). This assumes a process in which students take representations derived directly from text and blend them with other information gleaned from prior knowledge to create a mental model of the situation described by a text. It is our supposition that some, and perhaps much, of this prior historical knowledge comes not from classrooms, but from "the outside," and specifically from film portrayals of the past.

By "historical movies," we refer not to documentary films (e.g. Ken Burns' "Civil War"), but to commercial motion pictures that portray factual historical events or people, but that are primarily mass market productions aimed at telling a dramatic story (e.g. Gladiator, Bravehart, Black Robe). Admittedly, these films fall along a spectrum—from those that make some meaningful attempt at historical accuracy (e.g.. Schindler's List), to those that use a historical backdrop to tell an entirely fictional story (e.g. Forrest Gump). Whether students can clearly discern the lines of demarcation that exist along this spectrum is an open question (OS).

Many of today's students, products as they are of the television and video revolutions, are more comfortable with visual images than with written material, as numerous studies on media literacy have demonstrated (Wartella, 1980; Kubey, 1990). Feature films are therefore a possible basis from which students begin to form understandings (and in all likelihood misunderstandings) of historical events that they subsequently use to interpret more conventional historical sources in the social studies classroom. They also may provide alternative perspectives and help motivate students to explore written materials (Johnson and Vargas, 1994).

Our own interest in this topic springs to a great extent too from past studies in which we were involved. For example, while listening to a High School Junior "think aloud" through a historical problem-solving task centering on the murder of Julius Caesar, it was apparent that this student's thoughts and point of view on that famous incident were considerably influenced by a recent viewing of the Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton vehicle "Cleopatra" (see Paxton, in-press). Or, in an interview with fifth grade students asking how they would research the impact of the Pilgrims on the history of North America, many students referred to the Disney film "Pocahontas" in order to formulate their answer.

Of course, "what and how students learn from movies" is a big question: too big for any one study. We emphasize at this point that this is a pilot study. In essence, this paper amounts to a question in search of an operational methodology for seeking its answer. Therefore, in an effort begin to navigate this commodious problem-space, we intend to begin by focusing on a specific aspect of how students might engage the past through motion pictures: that is, viewing the past from multiple perspectives.

The idea that history can, and should, be viewed from multiple perspectives is not new: It is a topic that has gained significant support in the research literature of historical learning in recent years (Holt, 1990; Gabella, 1994; Rouet, Britt, Mason & Perfetti, 1996). To briefly explain, this

research argues that there is no such thing as a history, but there are instead multiple histories that account for the perspectives of the triumphant and the vanquished, the powerful and the marginalized, the mainstream and the minority, the enslaved and the enslavers, and so on. History, to a large degree, is made up of competing narratives of the past, not single truths; and we determine the goodness of any one of these narratives by asking how it accounts for the available evidence (Cronon, 1992; Tetreault, 1986; Wineburg, 1991).

Educational publishing companies are well aware of this shift from viewing the past from a single perspective to a more multifaceted approach. In recent years, textbook editors have scrambled to insert information about women, minorities and oppressed classes into primers that previously told mainly of the powerful, the white and/or the "winners" (Sewall, 2000).

One of the hallmarks of many (but not all) commercial motion pictures is the existence of a strong point of view. Specifically, there is often a hero, or heroes, from whose perspective the historical "story" is told. The result is that many movies take sides. There are the good guys and the bad guys; the oppressed and the oppressors; the weak and the strong. "Westerns" are a stereotypical example of this phenomenon, with many older movies portraying white settlers as the "good," and Native Americans as the "bad." Recent times have seen a reversal of this trend, with Native Americans and white settlers swapping the aforementioned roles. Two interesting questions that stem from this trend reversal are: Do students notice a movie's perspective? And, does the perspective of a movie have an effect on the way students think about the past?

Historians, in fact, attach great significance to the background and biases of those who write historical texts. The association between a historian and his or her source of evidence is of critical importance to the entire enterprise of historical research (Dickinson, Gard & Lee, 1978). Although movies are a visual medium, filmmakers are very much the "authors" of historical movies. They have individual and collective perspectives and worldviews. Just as a historian

leaves the indelible mark of agency upon a text, so too do filmmakers produce movies that come from an identifiable perspective. Ortega y Gassett long ago uttered the truism about every age rewriting history to suit its own purposes; and so it is with movies, which often say as much about the times in which they were made as about the periods they purport to document (Seixas, 1993).

Movies, then, give the students who view them singular perspectives on the past. This leads to a number of important questions:

- What influence do historical movies have on students understanding of the history they learn inside the classroom?
- More specifically, how do background understandings formed from motion pictures influence the way students think about written historical texts, and specifically about history textbooks?
- How does viewing history from multiple perspectives, influence students understandings about the past and about epistemic issues within the discipline of history?
- Do adolescent students appropriately glean fact from fiction in historical movies? If so, what strategies do they use?
- Do students learn anything of educational value from historical movies? Should we, as teachers, encourage our students to watch them? If so why? If not, why not?

These are some of the questions we hope to explore, although we make no claim that we do so thoroughly here. Rather, by running this pilot study, we hope to hone in on the means with which to study these questions in a controlled manner. To begin our search for a method to

answer these questions, we undertook a simple psychological experiment that employed both quantitative and qualitative measures, but that is at its foundation a qualitative study.

METHODS

STUDENTS

Interviews were conducted with six high school students from a variety of different schools in Wisconsin. The students ranged from high school freshmen to seniors, with a mean age of 15.8 years. Four were male and two were female. All were good students, whose self-reported grade point averages averaged 3.6, and whose self-reported average grades in history classes were 3.7. This was essentially a convenience sample, the idea being to recruit students who would take the project seriously and produce abundant verbal data, thus allowing us to make decisions about the design of future studies. The participants were paid $15 for taking part in the interviews, which each lasted about an hour and a half.

PROCEDURES

Two films were selected for the study. These were then edited in a manner that left the main plot coherent, but that reduced the length to approximately 13 minutes total for each film. This technique, utilized in other similar studies, is used to make practical the length of time needed to study individual participants (cf. Seixas, 1993). The two movies cover the same historical event (American Westward expansion during the late 19th Century), but from different perspectives. The films are similar in age and production values. Both are big-budget, well-known Hollywood productions and "star vehicles" for "A-list" actors. Film A (Dances with Wolves) portrays Plains Indians sympathetically, painting a complex society in a populated area, and viewing with

foreboding the coming of hordes of white settlers. Film B (Far and Away) idealistically portrays an Irish man's struggle to come to America and claim a piece of the Midwest as his own—with scant reference to the Native Americans being displaced.

Students began by filling out a questionnaire giving personal information, as well information about their attitude toward history classes, history movies, and the amount of historical knowledge they believe they learn from history movies. They then viewed the two film excerpts. Three of the students began by viewing both Film A followed by Film B, and three viewed the films in the reverse order. After each segment, students were asked to say what the segment was about, whether they had any questions about the segment, and whether they have any responses to it.

After this initial viewing is complete, students are asked to think aloud as they read through an excerpt from a commonly-used American history textbook dealing with the same events the movies portray (King, McRae & Zola, 1993) (see Appendix A). During think-aloud sessions, students are asked to vocalize their on-line thoughts as they read through texts (cf. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Ericsson & Simon, 1984; Pressley & Afflerbach 1995).

After reading the textbook excerpt, students were asked to write a brief essay responding to the following question (taken directly from the same textbook used for the think-aloud session):

> For more than a century, Americans have debated the reason why whites felt the need to take the Native Americans' land from them. Some said whites had economic interests in the land; others said whites wanted to oppress Native Americans for racial reasons; still others held that whites were bringing civilization to the Native Americans.
>
> The Question: Which of these explanations seems most believable?

The participants then took part in a semi-structured interview, responding to questions about the historical event and about the movies; for example comparing movie accounts, comparing movie accounts to that of a textbook, discussing the validity and trustworthiness of the movie and textbook accounts, and so on. The questions were as follows:

1. How do you feel about the text? Just a few words to comment on it would do.
2. How does the text make you feel about Westward Expansion?
3. How does the text make you feel about the subject of history?
4. How do you feel about the way the text presents history? (Prompt: interesting? Boring? Why?)
5. How did you go about answering the question? (Prompt: What strategies did you use?)
6. What kind of strategies do you usually use when answering this kind of question?
7. How did the text influence the way you answered the question?
8. To what extent do you trust the information in this textbook excerpt?
9. How do you feel about the history movies you watched?
10. Do you think you learn anything about history from watching these kinds of movies?
11. What did "Dances with Wolves" make you think about Westward Expansion?
12. What did "Far and Away" make you think about Westward Expansion?
13. How do you feel about the way the films present history?
14. To what extent do you think these movies are historically accurate?
15. How did the movie excerpts influence the way you thought about the text excerpt?
16. In what way did the movies affect the way you thought, and wrote, about the question?
17. Is it helpful, or not, to show these kinds of movies in history classes?

Results

Due to the tentative nature of this pilot study, for the most part this Results section will be descriptive. Statistical or qualitative analysis will be at a minimum, since in our view data collected from a convenience sample of six students does not merit such scrutiny. Nevertheless, some interesting outcomes were attained.

For one while these students as a group seemed ambivalent toward history movies, rating their fondness for them at a mean of 5.75 on a 10-point Likert scale, they rated the amount they learn from such movies higher—a mean of 7.0. As for their attitude toward history classes, the group's average rating was 6.7.

Think Aloud Analysis

Following the lead of Ericsson & Simon (1984), and Cote, Goldman and Saul (1998) data analysis of the think aloud portion of the interviews involved categorizing participants' statements into one of the following: re-statements, elaborations, evaluations, or inferences. This analysis yielded a number of interesting (and preliminary) findings.

First, it is interesting to note that none of our participants spontaneously made any overt inter-textual connections (Bloome & Robertson, 1993; Hartman, 1992) from the textbook passage to either movie when engaged in the think aloud portion of the interview even though they had just spent the preceding thirty minutes watching and discussing the movie clips. Rather, almost all of the commentary from the participants during the think aloud involved re-stating what they had just read. As one participant put it, "I'm just reading the information. Taking it in. I'm not, I'm not really making any opinions I guess"(J.G.). Of course, this may be a function of how the think-aloud task was set up since we didn't explicitly ask them to link the text to the movies.

For two of the six participants, the only commentary was in the form of re-statements (L.Si., LSW). This usually took the form of summarizing or paraphrasing what they had just read. For example, in relation to a text passage listing the names of tribes who roamed the Great Plains in the first half of the 19th Century L.Si. said, " it's talking about all of the different Native American tribes living during that time."

For two of the other four participants the think aloud was also primarily in the form of re-statements but with an occasional bursts of elaboration (J.G., K.H.). For example, J.G. made a connection to personal prior knowledge and drew an inference to a text passage on treaties between the U.S. Government and Native Americans in which reservations were established by saying, " from what I know…reservations aren't very high quality today. Um, and I'm assuming they were just like prisons in those days." Or, as another participant elaborating on the same text passage said, "(they're) like reservations in Wisconsin" today (K.H.).

The think aloud of the fifth participant (A.R.) involved a good deal of elaboration and some requests for clarification. For example, at one point in a description of the geography of the West he asked, "What's a great basin?" He also drew some inferences from specific text passages. For example, in response to a passage that described the mass slaughter of buffalo he said, "what did they do with them? I guess for the furs or something."

The think aloud of the sixth participant (A.K.) was very different from the others. This participant did a great deal of elaborating and evaluating the text during the think aloud. Indeed, his think aloud is probably best characterized as involving the adoption of a critical (resistant) stance to the text (Rosenblatt, 1988; Wade et al,1994). He constantly questioned the validity of the text and the motivations/beliefs of the authors of the text. As he said of a text passage on the U.S. governments building forts along the trails to protect settlers, "I think it's (text) trying to justify what the Americans are doing." Or, at another point he said, "I think it (the text) should say more about how they (U.S. Government) always make treaties but they never kept the treaties."

Essay Analysis

Analyzing participants essays and their subsequent verbal reflections upon their essays involved: first, identifying the explanation/reason each participant gave as an answer to the

question; second, identifying each major idea in their essay; and then, third, determining what particular source of information (e.g. movies, textbook, other prior knowledge) they used to generate each idea unit in their essay.

Figure 1.

The participants essays:

L.Si.:	I think the white's main purpose for moving into the Native Americans' land was for economic reasons. The west was rich in minerals, and beautiful free land, and this interested the whites. I don't think the whites were trying to kick the whites out of their land. They were just interested in the area and wanted to explore its benefits. I also don't think the whites wanted to oppress the Native Americans racially. The whites weren't bothered by that aspect and they were just focused on the economic interests of the land.
K.H.:	The statement that whites had economic interests in the land makes most sense because around that time period the whites were going out west in search of gold and also more land. I think that the whites thought that they could fight the Indians for ownership of the land because they were used to fighting for everything. The whites wanted to make their country more prosperous and have a better nation that the Europeans. By gaining this land of the Indians they would increase their settlement and their country would grow.
L.Sw:	Out of the three explanations given, I believe all three could be proven right. To me, all could be right from past history. The first explanation is believable because of the vast land area and the Native Americans did not believe in owning land. Resources were abundant everywhere and the Native Americans didn't think anyone owned them. The second explanation is believable, because of past experience with white Americans thinking that they were better than blacks, who were mostly thought of as slaves. The third explanation is believable because the clergy is always looking for people to spread their religion to. In doing so, they will bring civilization to the Native Americans.
J.G.:	All of the explanations make sense to some extent and are all believable as an extremely large group of people is being discussed. Obviously, some of the land that was taken had no economic value, it is likely that much of it did. So taking native lands was a way of getting easy money. Whites oppressing natives for racial reasons seems to be a likely answer as well, however it makes more sense to combine the two explanations in saying that whites took lands because of their economic value while they mistreated the natives and took advantage of them because of their beliefs in racial superiority. A less likely answer is that whites believed they were bringing civilization to the natives. If this were true the whites would have been kind and not oppressed the native Americans.
A.R.:	I think the reasons white man took native land was a combination of not understanding Indian people, and the pursuit for more land. I don't believe that whites just attacked Indians and took their land just because they were Indians. As seen in the second movie, the settlers litterly (literally) had races to claim land, racing and crawling over each other to pick up a flag. I think the last thing on their minds was how many Indians can we kill today.

A.K.:	I think that the oppression for racial reasons sounds best. I think this because if you look back at the number of atrocities committed against Indians they all were negative and harmful. And they all weren't just the taking of land, but the cold blooded killing of innocent Indians also seems to be an example of racial hatred.

Word counts of the essays indicated an Average length of 95 words per essay (range 58-137 words). For simplicity and uniformity, idea units in the essays were defined as individual sentences in the essays.

In terms of reasons listed as answers to the essay question: 2 of the 6 (L.Si., K.H.) listed economic reasons as making the most sense, 1 of the 6 (A.R.) said it was a combination of two reasons, another 2 of the 6 (L.Sw., J.G.) said all three explanations contained in the question make sense, and one identified racial reasons (involving racism and oppression) as sounding "the best." Interestingly, this sixth participant (A.K.) was the same individual who had taken a critical stance to the textbook passage during the think aloud.

Five of the six students identified prior knowledge outside of the content of the materials they were provided in the interview on the topic as the primary source of information they used to answer the essay question. For example, L.Sw. said it came, "just from school and everything else," while J.G. said, "I just kind of used logic", and "lectures and textbooks." Indeed, of the five who did identify using some outside prior knowledge one (K.H.) said it all came from prior knowledge learned before the interview, "from my history class".

The participant (A.R.) who claimed to have no outside prior knowledge on the subject stated, " I don't really know anything about it (the topic)." When asked if he had ever studied the topic he replied, "I imagine I just don't remember it."

All six participants acknowledged utilizing the materials we provided (i.e. the two movies and the text book passage) as a resource to generate their essays. In terms of using the movies three participants (L.Si., L.Sw., A.R.) acknowledged using Far and Away. As one (L.Si.) of these

participants said," that gives me a mental picture, so I kind of remember that stuff." Or as another (A.R.) said, " I kind of quoted the movie here," when discussing a line of his essay that read, " As seen in the second movie, the settlers litterly (literally) had races to claim land, racing and crawling over each other to pick up land."

Three of the six (J.G., A.R., A.K.) acknowledged using Dances with Wolves as a resource. J.G. noted that Dances with Wolves supports his idea that, "whites have mistreated other races." A.R. was the only one of the six to acknowledge using both movies. In relation to a line of his essay which read, " the reasons white man took native land was a combination of not understanding Indian people, " that he got that information, "from like the first movie (Dances)...like only, like I saw (only) the one (Caucasian) guy attempting to you know understand (the Native Americans)." The other individual who cited Dances with Wolves as a resource is the same individual (A.K.) who took a critical stance to the textbook during the think aloud.

It is probably worth exploring this individual's (A.K.) essay more fully at this point. A.K. cited racial hatred (his term) as the best explanation in his essay. He felt Dances with Wolves and prior knowledge from reading books about such topics as Custer's Last Stand validated his answer. Indeed, he said he didn't rely on the textbook at all and went on to denounce its usefulness by saying, "all that told me was the fact that textbooks aren't supposed to be taking sides...(it is) so neutral to the point that I really didn't get much out of it besides the facts." He also rejected the value of Far and Away by saying, "(it) didn't talk anything about Indians, or anything about the land...They just kind of race for it."

It is interesting to note that at 15, A.K. was a high school freshman, one of the youngest participants in the study. Where did he get the ability to apply this perspective--a perspective that allowed him to see that all sources, including textbooks, must be understood as taking sides?

Where did he learn that a movie (in this case Dances with Wolves) might have more of value to say about a history topic than a textbook? One possibility, based on his statements during the interview, is that the amount of prior knowledge this participant brought to the task was much greater than any of the others. Although all participants were academically strong in their performance in history class, only this one said, "I always liked history. And used to spend lots of time in that section of the library." Moreover, only this participant pointed to specific texts besides the three we provided as a source for his ideas when writing the essay (e.g. his reference to the book on Custer).

All of this prior knowledge meant this participant formed or already had a situation model (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Kintsch, 1998) of the topic of the interview (i.e., Westward expansion). This allowed him to make many more elaborations while reading. Because the other participants seemed to have much more limited prior knowledge of the topic, they appeared simply to be trying to form a text base representation while reading during the think aloud. This meant they spent most of the think aloud re-stating what they had just read. Subsequently, this delimited the types of inter-textual connections and insights they saw/made in comparison with A.K. during the essay writing task.

Semi-structured Interview Analysis

While it was rare for students to refer to the movie excerpts either during their think-aloud readings of the textbook excerpt, or in their essays, they nevertheless did express clear opinions about the influence and value of movies on their historical understanding when asked. Their retrospective reflections on the value of history textbooks showed that students, as a group, found them to be trustworthy, but were aware of their perceived limitations.

What follows are five tables displaying student responses to selected questions from the semi-structured interview. This "raw data" is followed by brief analysis.

Figure 2
To what extent do you trust the information in the textbook excerpt?

L.Si.	Um, just because it's one-sided, that would be the main draw back but I think it's believable.
A.K.	I trust the fact that the numbers are correct. If I really wanted to prove the textbook wrong I would go look up the treaty and see if it was wrong. I'd say I trust it. They seem to know what they are talking about even if they are really basic and really neutral. To me, I think that they know more than just this, but they don't want to bombard us with too much information. Keep it basic, keep it neutral and maybe we can finish by the end of the hour. Do you know what I mean? Just get it into their heads and then…
K.H.	Um, I trust that all the information is true and stuff, but I know that you don't learn a lot of things that happened in history, like the bad things that they try to cover up. You know, we learn the general things, but we don't learn about the, you know, the graphic details. I trust the information, because I never read that there was something different.
J.G.	I trust it. It didn't contradict anything I already knew. So I assumed it was accurate.
L.Sw.	I trust pretty much a lot I read, I'm kind of gullible about that stuff. But I mean I didn't think you would give me something that was false information. It seemed pretty true so.
A.R.	Um I guess I trust it more than movies, just because I've seen so many stupid movies that don't make sense at all…. I mean I guess I generally trust texts better. Well just…I mean...I mean movies...I get the impression that you know most movies come from the media. And, the media is just there to you know make money. And you know the media is a business too. I don't know, I guess that's my view.

All of the students stated that they trusted the veracity of the information in the history textbook. However that trust was far from blind. Some of the students seemed aware of what they perceived as the limitations of those texts. For example, one student called the textbook "one-sided," while another indicated it was "really basic and really neutral," indicating that he might be able to prove the textbook wrong if he could "go look up the treaty." Another student, K.H., states that while reading texts of this sort "you don't learn a lot of things that happened in

history, like the bad things that they try to cover up." Finally, a fourth student said he trusted the textbook, but admitted, "I'm kind of gullible about that stuff."

Figure 3
How does the text make you feel about the subject of history?

L.Si.	Um, I thought that it was sort of one-sided. But I think history should be more like I don't know, it shouldn't go in depth on one certain people and how they might have been cheated out, but maybe cover both of them, both viewpoints.
A.K.	I think it makes me think about teaching younger kids, because it doesn't go into detail. I mean it does in the fact that it talks about numbers, but it doesn't go into about why the whiter people were doing this, why the Indians were fighting back. What else were the white people doing that were making them mad, besides just using their land? Why were they really mad about losing their land, was this land sacred to them. But then I think it does a good job of not really being too one-sided in the fact that yeah the Indians were cold-blooded for killing white people and we don't know why.
K.H.	Um, I enjoy like when the teacher talks and stuff more, like when he tells us like experiences and stuff that happened. I like hearing stories and stuff rather than actually reading facts from the textbook. I don't know, it's more interesting I think.
J.G.	About the subject of history in general? Well I'd say it would depend on the text. For just about the subject of history to me...um...I'm only, I'm interested in parts of history…or I'm interested in reading about parts of history that I'm interested in. So I guess it depends on the person.
L.Sw.	Well, I don't know how it should make me feel, it just makes me feel the same, it doesn't get me too excited. But maybe some kids maybe like this stuff more than I do so…
A.R.	History. I'm not sure that the text influenced my, my view of history a lot. Because I've always kind of had a view of history in that I've always found history to be interesting. I never remember any of it. Um, I guess when I, when I see something like this or you know read something like that I guess it kind of makes me understand: alright where did we come from? Where are the Indians now? I guess I realize that it's important.

The responses to this question were typical of other studies that have asked students to reflect on their feelings about the discourse practices of history textbooks (cf. Paxton, 1997, in-press). That is there are a number of negative value statements, such as "it doesn't get me too excited," or "it was sort of one-sided." Other statements reflect student pleas for additional information, in

which they bemoan the lack of depth typical of textbook rhetoric, such as "it doesn't go into detail," or "I like hearing stories and stuff rather than actually reading facts from the textbook." Never once do any of the students say the textbook excerpt sparks their interest, or makes them feel positive about the subject. However, A.R. did note that the textbook excerpt led him to, "realize that it's important."

Figure 4
Do you think you learn anything about history from watching these kinds of movies?

L.Si.	Yeah. They talk about the Sioux. Some of it might not be accurate but maybe that was sort of like the right area that they lived in. Sort of like the plains and everything.
A.K.	Oh, of course. All the time. I mean, I don't know if I will be like I have to look that up. Like in Pearl Harbor, for example, that kind of took things way out. I thought it was the dumbest movie. I never knew that they dropped bombs and had little spinny things, so I learned that. I also learned that some people don't know how to act. About the history thing, I guess yeah you can learn a lot from movies, but when it comes to me, now this is just me, I usually if I really like the movie I will find everything I can about the event that the movie is talking about. And if I find that there are contrasting sources, I will believe the book and not the movie. I know that Hollywood is only interested in making money, they are not interested in educating us. So, I would have to say that movies sometimes have a bigger impact than textbooks because You don't want to learn, it's almost in your mind, you have to go to school, everyone is always complaining. Even sometimes I find myself saying, oh my gosh, I have History homework. Even though I really like history. If someone says we are watching a movie in History class, it's like, YES, we are watching a movie. It is better than doing it in school.
K.H.	Yeah, I think actually, I think I learn more, because I can enjoy watching a movie or like reading a book, or something. I think I learn to like to picture it so much better. So even though it might be a fictional story or something, it like captures my attention more, and I remember it I guess, and so it helps. I don't know.
J.G.	Um.. I think not necessarily from uh.. a technical aspect but if you're looking at it kind of taps into the more of an emotional way of learning history.
L.Sw.	Well, yeah because it relates to what we are doing. When it was showing all the people moving west and bringing their covered wagons and all, going to get their free land and I mean it shows you. And like I said it gives you a mental picture, so you kind of get to picture instead of just reading about it and wondering, oh I wonder what these people looked like, and how they acted, you know? I like that part.
A.R.	Um, I guess it depends on how accurate the movie is. I guess one you could verify it by you

	know accurate sources going and looking at you know history books or you know trying to find accurate sources or by who made it. I mean if somebody who made it was you know credible and did make you know historically accurate stuff. Yeah I could believe that. Yeah, think the movies, um I learn more about the general concepts from the movies.

Despite the relative lack of impact the movies seemed to have on student think-aloud comments, or on the essays they actually wrote, most of the students seem be believe movies have a relatively large impact on their understanding of the past. Three of the students referred to how their mental representation of the past is affected by history movies. For example, L.Sw. said, " . . . it gives you a mental picture, so you kind of get to picture instead of just reading about it and wondering, 'oh I wonder what these people looked like, and how the acted, you know?'" Likewise, K.H. said, "I think I learn to like to picture it so much better." Or, as A.R. said, "I learn more about the general concepts (of history) from the movies."

The potential motivational aspect of history movies was also a recurrent theme. J.G. said, " . . . it kind of taps into the more of an emotional way of learning history." A.K. noted, "I usually if I really like the movie I will find everything I can about the event that the movie is talking about." While noting that history movies are often fictional, K.H. said they nonetheless have an emotional impact: "So even though it might be a fictional story or something, it like captures my attention more, and I remember it I guess, and so it helps."

Four of the students were skeptical about the value of movies as transmitters of historical information, however, because of their perceived lack of historical accuracy.

Figure 5
To what extent do you think that these two movies are historically accurate?

L.Si.	Um, I don't know if there was a man that started living with the Indians from the U.S. army or not, but I mean it could've happened. I thought more of it as the army and the Native Americans were getting along. Which wasn't good. I am not sure about the race at all, like that thing with the cannon but, I could see the claiming and everything. And how there was grief flowing through everybody.

A.K.	Hollywood just wants to make money. Their purpose is to entertain us, not to educate us, so their first priority isn't to find out if it is accurate. Where as textbooks usually try a little harder.
K.H.	Um, well probably not, but I'm sure it's not exactly accurate. But, it seems like in the first movie, where the guy went talking with like a couple of Indians, and they kind of make peace between themselves, well, I'm sure that stuff like that actually happened. So, it's like stuff like that happened, but the stories, and you know, the exact words that they spoke changed. And like the second movie, um it was probably pretty much the same but maybe it wasn't sort of, I don't know that seemed pretty logical.
J.G.	um I've .....I would, I wouldn't, I wouldn't trust it...No, I wouldn't trust it. I've... there's, there was no proof to me that it was any...I dunno...um someone that was credible to tell me that it is true.
L.Sw.	Well, the white guy in that one (Dances with Wolves) he was trying to communicate with the Indians and I don't think it would have been like that. I think he might have been more shy around them. I don't think the Indians would want to come towards him, I think that they would be kind of scared. That other guy (Far and Away), yeah that seems pretty historically accurate to me. I'm not saying it's more accurate, I'm just saying that um... Well, actually Dances with Wolves, the Indian part of it seemed pretty accurate, but the relations between the Indians and the white guy seemed different. And there weren't any relations between them in the other one. It was different.
A.R.	Ha, I don't know (about Dances with Wolves) I'm not like an expert on the subject. I really have no idea...I don't know (about Far and Away) same thing. I guess I just kind of have to go with it. I mean normally I would compare to what I already know but don't really know anything about it so ha... Um I guess they kind of take different points of view so in that sense I can't really say which one is more accurate.

All of the students were skeptical about the trustworthiness of the movies as historical documents—a fact that may account for their relative lack of impact on think-aloud comments or in the essays. A.K.'s response to this question was articulate and to the point: "Hollywood just wants to make money. Their purpose is to entertain us, not to educate us, so their first priority isn't to find out if it is accurate. Where as textbooks usually try a little harder." Despite the unanimous belief that the historical content of these movies is questionable, all of these students feel there is a place for them in the history classroom.

Figure 6
Is it helpful, or not, to show these kinds of movies in history classes?

L.Si.	I think some people might like um concentrate on the movies more than the textbooks, just because it's like picture and everything, color. They're good. But there is also a side of them that might not be completely true.
A.K.	Yeah. If the teacher knows that some parts of the movie aren't true to historical fact…don't show them. Because some kids will get confused even if you tell them. It seems lower budget movies, the more accurate you get…sometimes.
K.H.	I definitely think it's helpful. Cause it caught my attention more. It made me want to learn more about what happened, and so I think it's interesting. It's a lot more interesting seeing a movie like that then seeing a filmstrip or something, because people normally don't pay attention to it. You know, like an extremely historical movie, like documentaries or something, or a filmstrip like where some guy's talking about, saying like 'this year…' I don't know, like this is like a lot more enjoyable, and people pay attention more, so it helps me in like, I don't know, other kinds of movies like that. I would probably pay attention more.
J.G.	Um, well, uh assuming that they're accurate I think that it's helpful, but I wouldn't us it as uh…I would only use it as uh giving students a way to relate to other information that they learned. I wouldn't make it a main source of information.
L.Sw.	I do think it is helpful. Because if you just show a normal documentary film, kids get bored and they don't even pay attention, and this gives them a different script for them to pay attention to. It's a lot better that just laying down the facts.
A.R.	Um I dunno. My view on movies in the classroom is kind of…I've seen teachers a lot…just kind of oh well I don't have a lesson plan today so ha well we're just gonna watch a movie. I've seen that a lot and I mean I guess as long as it's not just you know, oh well we don't have anything else to do let's watch a film, I guess I don't mind them. I mean yeah I have no problem with them. Um I guess it goes back to the same thing I said…You know I guess some people would you know pay more attention to movies than...you know reading a textbook. And I can imagine a lot of people learning better from that. And to me, at least for me I find it easier to find the general concept in the movie.

Every one of these six students said they feel that Hollywood movies have a place in history classes. The overall endorsement was qualified, however, mostly due to a concern about the historical accuracy of these movies, along with A.R.'s concern about movies being used as a time-wasting device. The motivational aspect of showing movies was apparent in most of the student's responses. Examples include J.G. saying movies give "giving students a way to relate

to other information that they learned," while K.H. said movies in her history classes "made me want to learn more about what happened, and so I think it's interesting."

Four of the students spontaneously (that is without prompting from the interviewer) compared history movies to other activities within the history classroom. By comparison to other ways of delivering history to students, they prefer and are more engaged by movies. Documentary films did not fare well in this comparison, with two students specifically noting they preferred Hollywood movies to "filmstrips"—which itself seemed to be a pejorative term. "I think some people might like um concentrate on the movies more than the textbooks, just because it's like picture and everything, color," said L.Si. While L.Sw noted that, "if you just show a normal documentary film, kids get bored and they don't even pay attention, and this gives them a different script for them to pay attention to."

Discussion

The purpose of this pilot study was not to reach any firm conclusions about how Hollywood history movies influence the "historical consciousness" of high school students, or on how it effects their ability to "think historically." Rather, it was an attempt to place a tentative toe into this these deep waters, and then to ponder how to proceed.

That students' understanding of the past is influenced by the representations put forth in commercial movies would seem to be an undeniable truth. But the dynamics of this influence are not well understood, and are close to nonexistent in the research literature of teaching and learning history.

One thing we have learned is that this will not be an easy problem to unpack. Students claim that movies help them form a "mental picture" of past peoples and events. They also seem to place educational value in watching these movies, even in the history classroom. However, when given a problem-solving task, with a few exceptions, they rarely reflected on the film excerpts

they had just watched. Perhaps this is a healthy line of demarcation between what is after all historical fiction, and what is "real history;" a sign of a school system that socializes students to value written text as an information resource over film and other forms of multi-media. Just as likely, our methodology failed to shed sufficient light on the interaction between history movies and students understanding of the past.

Where to proceed from here is still unclear to us, and frankly we are hoping that feedback from this paper presentation will give us some ideas. So far, we have come up with a number of possible research paths. These include:

- Bringing in multiple texts to have students—possibly in experimental and control groups—think about a historical problem-solving task. In this scenario, one experimental group would have a collection of texts, along with one or two movie "texts" to work with. The control group would have the same collection of texts, but no movies.
- Designing an expert/novice study in which a group of high school students view films and solve a problem, then comparing these students to a group of adult historians engaging in the same task.
- Collecting a retrospective group of movie representations of the same historical figure and/or event, then having students reflect on the different portrayals. For example, one could bring together the many and varying film portrayals of George Armstrong Custer over the past 50 years.
- Comparing film portrayals of an event with texts describing the same event. For example, have students read a textbook account and watch a film account of the same specific historical event (e.g. D-Day as depicted in Saving Private Ryan and in a textbook, or a book by a well-known historian on the same event.) The researcher could then determine

what each form of text contributes to the students' formation of a situation model of the event.

Other possibilities have also occurred to us, and we continue to reflect on the possibilities. However, for now we look to the counsel of others to assist in our decisions about which way to proceed.

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Appendix A

The Fort Laramie Treaty

In the 1850s and 1860s, about 250,000 Native Americans—in dozens of different tribes—roamed the Great Plains, the mountains, and the Great Basin. Most of these tribes had lived in western North America for hundreds of years: the Arapahos, Kiowas, Comanches, Cheyennes, Osages, Pawnees, Blackfoot, Crows, and Sioux. Others had arrived more recently: the Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Seminoles, and Delawares.

Migration from the East disrupted the Native American way of life. Pioneer trails stretched across Indian homelands. Gold seekers and pioneers trampled the buffalo range, killed thousands of the animals unnecessarily. Gradually, the government built forts along the trails to protect travelers from Native Americans seeking to drive them off Indian lands.

One official, Thomas Fitzpatrick, thought that the Plains Indians would rebel against the devastation of their hunting grounds. He called on the government to make treaties, as it had been doing for 60 years with the eastern tribes.

In 1851 government agents met with 10,000 Indians from 8 tribes in a great council at Fort Laramie, Wyoming. The result of the talks was the Fort Laramie Treaty, which gave the United States the right to build more roads and forts on the plains. In return, the United States would make annual payments to the tribes for fifty years. The treaty also defined the boundaries of each tribe's hunting grounds The government's goal was to prevent conflict by keeping the settlers and the Native Americans apart.

A Path to War

The treaty proved a path to war, not peace. The government did not realize that individual Indians were not bound by the decisions of their chiefs. In order to survive, many Indian tribes followed the wandering buffalo as they always had, ignoring boundaries set for their hunting grounds.

Settlers, too, disregarded the Fort Laramie Treaty. When it was signed, few people expected that throngs of settlers would soon crowd the trails west. Lured by minerals, timber, and fertile soils. Some of these settlers moved onto Indian lands. As greater numbers of people poured into the West. Conflicts between settlers and Indians grew more frequent and more bitter.

The government tried to keep order by buying Indian land to resell to the settlers. In a series of treaties signed between 1853 and 1856, the government acquired 174 million acres, paying very little per acre. Some treaties established **reservations**, areas set aside for Indians. Some people saw the reservation as protection for Native Americans. Others saw them as a means of moving the Indians out of the way of the settlers. For most Native Americans the reservations were like prisons, and they fought against being confined there.